SLOW DEATH FUNNIES 11 is out after a couple of years wait. This issue features the last of the late Greg Irons artwork. I know from the last conversations I had with Greg that he had become depressed and dissatisfied with his comic book work. He had started to learn the art of tattoo and the last year he spent in the U.S. he did a lot more tattoos than comic book stories. Like the majority of the underground cartoonists, he didn't see much of a future in what he was doing. His work was out there, but he made very little money from it. And, yes, he wanted success. He was never comfortable in the hippy artist role. Greg came to California in 1967 to be a musician and only got into art by coincidence. He did some rock posters and worked for Grunt Records for awhile, then did a lot of drawing when he met Tom Veitch. Greg was at his peak as a cartoonist when he was illustrating Veitch's stories. He was never all that interested in writing his own stories. Most of his own pieces are thinly-disguised biographical sketches and while Greg enjoyed drawing Gregor, he admitted to me that he didn't really know what he was going to do with him. He didn't really see himself doing a continuing strip about the monkey though some people were pushing him in that direction. The Gregor stories wander around various ideas, but they are never resolved. Greg wanted to be the best at what he did and I know he never really got over being rejected by the Zap gang at The Print Mint. *Zap* was the *Action Comics* of the underground and the guys who were in it were the avant-garde of their era. Anyone else wasn't quite there. This isn't true, of course, because there were a lot of great comic books in the period and most are too unique to be compared. But Greg felt that *Zap* was the top and for him to be anywhere else made him feel inferior. He wasn't alone. There were numerous artists who felt the same way. I know some fine cartoonists who were so overshadowed and intimidated by Crumb's reputation and style that they dropped out of cartooning and left the area.

And I remember the pride on Ron Turner's face the day he told me in his office that he had gotten control of *ZAP*. The way Ron was beaming said it all. Until that time, he always felt overshadowed by The Print Mint. I saw the same look on Bob Rita's face years before when he proudly stated that *he* was the publisher of *ZAP*. There is a hierarchy in every endeavor. For writers, it's **THE NEW YORKER**, or **HARPER'S** or *The New York Times Review of Books*. For photographers, it was always **LIFE**. For underground cartoonists, it was *ZAP* and anything else was secondary. *YELLOW DOG*, for example, which began as a tabloid, was looked upon with contempt by nearly every cartoonist I talked to. Roger Brand used to say he hated YD and all those pissing dog jokes. It was a local cartoon market and lot of people, Irons included, went down to the Print Mint and sold stuff, but I can't think of anyone who ever had any pride in what they did for the title even after it shifted to comic book format. Greg certainly didn't. He had the same attitude of contempt for it as Brand.

All of this was around the end of the sixties. Things changed somewhat as Underground comix developed in the seventies. There were hundreds of titles in that decade and *ZAP* was only one of them. Still it retained the status of a Rolls Royce or of Bill Graham's Fillmore Auditorium in relation to other titles. There were some very nice issues of titles like *SNARF* and *BIJOU*, but in all the time I have been writing about the comix I have never heard someone ask, "Hey, seen the new *Snarf*?" *ZAP* came out about every two years and it was always an event in the local Bay Area underground. Now a new issue of *SLOW DEATH FUNNIES*, for instance, was an event around Last Gasp and I was around for the appearance of many of these comix, but a new *SLOW DEATH* was never comparable to the publication of a new *ZAP*. There was a peripheral reason for this that is seldom understood. The underground comix community was a closed clique in many ways and what happened therein was meaningful only to insiders. Max Scherr, who started the Berkeley *BARB* in 1965, loved Crumb's art and made it a practice of ripping it off and running it in his underground paper. Scherr would run a blown-up panel of a Crumb story as his cover and this type of publicity moved *ZAP* from the closed underground community into the wider hip community. Crumb and *ZAP* got out of the comix ghetto while most of the other comix and their underground creators did not. *Of all those who drew comix in the hippy days, those who became widely known were those whose work appeared in the underground papers as well as in the comic books.* Gilbert Shelton's Freak Brothers became known not through comic books, but through syndication in underground newspapers. The strip originated in Los Angeles in the *FREE PRESS* in 1968 and it was picked up by numerous papers in the Underground Press Syndicate. It stimulated McLeod at the *Georgia Straight* up in Vancouver to hire Rand Holmes to do *Harold Hedd* which was in turn passed around the syndicate and wound up in comic book form in the U.S. from Last Gasp. Bill Griffith's *ZIPPY* gained more attention in strip form than it did from the comic books and became one of the only strips to make the transition from underground to King Features. The neo-EC ecology oriented material in *SLOW DEATH* and *SKULL* was not reprinted in the weekly underground tabloids and did not share that wider audience. After the head shops were put out of business by changes in the drug laws in the early seventies, underground comix lost a major outlet and there was a serious decline in readership for awhile. The comix were distributed by some of the newly developing comic book stores, but only in urban areas. Most of the rural comic shops were interested in straight, not hip comics, which is why the underground companies have to maintain mail order divisions. My standard for comparison has been Nebraska for many years because I would go there to visit my family annually. While I can go into several large comic book stores here in the Bay Area and find all of the latest underground comix, I went into a number of stores in Lincoln and found no underground comix at all. A dealer told me there just isn't enough money to be made on them to make it worthwhile, not to mention the legal problems. Makes no difference that there are now straight comics that feature sex, gore, and violence, often in a more blatant fashion than the undergrounds. The numerous busts of *ZAP 4* [for Crumb's Joe Blow story] made the ugs a no-no for all but the bravest dealers.

No underground comic was blatantly pornographic in the way many of the current Eros titles are. Sex was satirical and often exaggerated to the point of absurdity in most undergrounds, particularly in the stories drawn by Crumb and S. Clay Wilson and Robert Williams [his Coochy Cooty stuff]. *YOUNG LUST* made a joke out of the lugubrious love comics published by Marvel and DC. All of the underground comix made it a point to attack the hypocrisy and moral prudery of the Establishment, to gross out the straights, the business cult, the nine-to-fivers, the hapless adults who had to work to make the money to pay for the excesses of their runaway kids who were hanging out smoking pot in Haight Ashbury or Tompkins Park or The Sunset.

The problem with the rebellion of young people that took place in the sixties was that the kids had no support group. In order to revolt, you have to create a new support group. Someone has to organize everything. People have to be fed. They have to have a place to live. They need medical and dental care. They have to have transportation. I used to laugh at the SDS revolutionaries and their pipe dreams. My question was always, then what? So the government is overthrown and capitalism goes into the trash can. Then what? How do people live in a smashed state? There was a group in Haight-Ashbury called the Diggers and they fed people in the afternoons down on the panhandle of Golden Gate park. The place was overrun with kids in the mid-sixties, say 1966-67, and none of them knew how to do anything. They had no skills. Just suburban kids used to having mommy make their dinner and wash their clothes, used to dad handing over a tenspot for the movies at the mall. In Haight-Ashbury they were babes in the wood. The drug dealers and the pimps and the con artists had a ball with all this innocence. Young girls were given acid and passed around crash pads and often wound up with the clap and a pregnant belly to take back home to Mom and Dad in Illinois or North Dakota. Many of them wound up turning tricks on the street or in massage parlors owned by the mafia. David Smith was dealing with an epidemic of drug addiction by 1967 and

a lot of kids died because they did not know how much of this or that drug they could handle. Every hospital emergency room had to deal with nightly freak-outs and botched abortion attempts and accidents caused by people who were stoned and just didn't care what they did. It was all far out and groovy and what's yer sign, man? The food the Diggers were serving was stolen, not donated. Well, groovy, huh? As long as there is a company to steal it from, but had a revolution taken place, that company would no longer exist until someone with organizational know how set it up and got it functioning again. If you take over, you have to be ready to run things. Someone has to know how to run the BART trains. Someone has to know how the operate the complex traffic system at the airport. Ah, the revolutionary rap of the sixties was such adolescent horseshit. The government must have had a lot of fun playing games with the kids in the streets. The acid came from the CIA, after all. Lsd was a possible mind-control drug in need of testing and what better place to test it than Haight-Ashbury with its population of runaway kids?

Without acid, would there have been underground comix? Crumb says in one of his introductions in **THE COMPLETE CRUMB** that he took acid in 1965 and it had a major effect on his drawing and his outlook. Many other underground cartoonists used drugs. I don't remember ever seeing Roger Brand when he wasn't smoking grass or half way drunk. Larry Todd was a genius with marijuana and made no secret of his talents. He published his techniques in various issues of **DR. ATOMIC**, particularly in the fourth issue which was his Pipe and Dope book. Shelton and Dave Sheridan always worked stoned. Hell, grass to most of the underground cartoonists I knew was as much a ritual as ganga to the Rastafarians of Jamaica.

Heh! Heh! If you compare Crumb's pre-acid with his post-acid work, you'd always have to say that the CIA was the father of underground comix, huh? MK-ULTRA FUNNIES.

Well, no sense carrying this any further. I would say that psychedelic drugs were the fuel of underground comix and music and perhaps of a lot of the poetry of the period. As I made my rounds gathering material for my columns from 1966-77, roughly a decade in which I was an active photo-journalist, I seldom met any creative people who were not toking, rolling up, or in some way using psychedelics to enhance their creativity. The most common odor backstage or in the studio or in the theater or in the dressing room was marijuana. I was never much of a user, because I am a non-smoker. I would take a toke and pass the sacramental J along, but I seldom if ever smoked alone and I can't remember buying a lid of my own. People often gave me joints, because that was the going gesture of friendship. I had a joint one of the Cockettes gave me at the Palace for years. It was in a plastic bag with a baby rattle and some other stuff. The rattle was off a costume worn by one of the drag queen's in a midnight show. The strongest grass I ever had was Larry Todd's. I made the mistake of taking a couple of drags at a Bay. Con held at the Claremont Hotel and I was totally wrecked the rest of the evening. I think John and Michele Wozniak drove me home to Indian Rock but I was at that state where I just glowed at everything. I heard what was said around me but didn't feel the need to reply or I just thought my reply in a microsecond and didn't know whether I had put it in words or not. So, underground comix were created in a haze of marijuana and since grass was still illegal and the government used it as a way of fighting and controlling the young there was always a slight paranoia wherever I went. Any stranger, after all, could be a narcotics agent [Norbert the Nark] and that included a FREEP columnist.

So if someone asks me if there would have been underground comix without the dope that fueled them, I have to say no and yes. No, the comix that exist today would not have existed, and yes, underground comix would have been but they would be very different in content.

Do I think smoking marijuana had anything to do with the death of Dave Sheridan? Yes, I do. Sheridan smoked regular cigarettes, but he smoked a lot of grass, too, and while a smoker exhales normally when smoking a regular cigarette, he tends to suck marijuana smoke deeper into the lungs and hold it there for maximum absorption and an enhanced high. Since the leaves of Marijuana have the same tars and toxins as those of tobacco, damage to the sensitive cells that coat the lungs is more serious. A lot of heavy pot smokers are dying of lung cancer these days and Dave was one of them. Hey, if you really need the artificial stimulation, make some brownies or add some marijuana to your spaghetti sauce.

To flash back to **SLOW DEATH 11**, it's time warp material, most of it dated about a decade ago. Greg Irons' cover is dated 1980. Warren Greenwood's story is from 1981, and the Wally Wood piece is from 1977. Tom Veitch's piece about Greg that opens the book is about a Greg he remembers, not the one I knew from 1978-82. Veitch paints Greg as someone who would never sell out and says he refused to participate in the Estren **HISTORY OF UNDERGROUND COMIX** back in 1974 unless he was paid so the "power brokers at Rolling Stone aced him out of the book." Along with S. Clay Wilson. Well, Tom, that isn't true at all. First of all, the book was produced by Straight Arrow Books which was run by Alan Rinzler and most of the work was done on it by John Goodchild. Straight Arrow was a division of Rolling Stone, but Jann Wenner had nothing to do with Estren's book. Wenner wasn't interested in comic art. He rejected it from the beginning because he thought it would make his music paper declassé. The book was Mark Estren's master's thesis and he originally sold it to Grove Press. Straight Arrow bought it from them and a great many of the artists whose art was used had already given their consent. S. Clay Wilson refused to participate? He has more art in the book than anyone else. See pages 65-67, 143, 145, 153, 217, 227, 239-40, 244, and 248. It was Greg's prerogative to refuse to participate, but at that point the book was a *fait accompli*; it was going to print one way or another, and in spite of the inadequacy of the text I think it helped more than hindered the cartoonists who opted to have their art included.

The truth is Greg wanted to be successful, but it embarassed him to promote himself. Well, you don't get success under capitalism without promoting yourself. Crumb always said he hated it, yet he's been interviewing himself for years and those interviews have run in some widely circulated magazines like **HIGH TIMES** making his name and his art notorious. I have a couple of dozen interviews he has done with various journalists over the years and I've personally seen him at two local signings and I know he has done many others elsewhere. Yes, he told me he hated it and felt like a fish in a bowl, but he knew he had to do it, that it was part of the business. Greg knew it, too, but he had a hard time with it. Around the time of his death he was promoting a line of t-shirts, going to comic conventions and selling drawings of Gregor, going to tattoo conventions and doing butterflies and rosebuds on women. He had started to become more social and to accept the commercial side of the art business as a necessary evil and I never felt his integrity was less because he took a more realistic attitude toward making a living with his talent. It's my feeling that the real reason Greg didn't participate in the Estren book was because he didn't like a lot of the artwork he had, didn't feel it was quite where he wanted it to be, and didn't want it to be out there in a book representing him at his best. He felt he was improving all the time, but that he had a ways to go. He was the ultimate Libra never quite certain that he couldn't have done it better if he had only worked on it awhile longer. I know he sent in artwork many times that he was still unsatisfied with because he had a deadline and needed the money.

If it seems I'm putting Greg down here, I've failed to get across to you that Greg was a person to me, not some idealistic anti-establishment hippy artist. He came to my house for dinner and for parties. He stopped by the club where I work on his bicycle and I went to his place on Stannage a number of times. I photographed his t-shirts on a model and did some promo for him. We were on television together. I knew the woman Greg was living with and was sorry when they broke up, but not because I didn't understand why. I knew he was still after something that would make him feel like a success and settling down to have children with her wasn't what he wanted to do at that time. Greg had a family back east. He could have gone home. A lot of the people who ran away to Haight-Ashbury in the sixties had their fling with sex, drugs, and rock and roll, then just went back home and finished college and went into the business world somewhere. Greg couldn't do that. He was disappointed that he was over thirty and still hadn't made his mark, but he was still in the battle. He had his tattoo needles and he enjoyed working on skin, knowing he was doing art that would last the length of a life, and he went off to Thailand to check out the techniques of the tattoo masters there. He didn't make it back.

You can get **SLOW DEATH 11** by mail from Ron Turner, POB 410067, San Francisco 94141-0067. Ron wants $5 and you get his latest catalog in the bargain.